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Artist Positioning

Positioning Myself as an Artist in the Research Field

My central aim in what follows is to determine how, and in what ways 'Lebensreform' philosophy and practice has shaped my ideology, commitments, personal aesthetic and art practice.

This text is the written part of my research project (titled 'ReForm'), undertaken in the context of the PhDArts programme of the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts at Leiden University between 2009 and 2015. The dissertation consists of an analysis of, and reflection on the social, ideological and spiritual underpinnings of the Lebensreform movement and its historical links, on the one hand to the 20th century European avant-gardes and radical political movements, and, on the other, to mid 20th century Californian utopian thinking and hippy counterculture. A sustained account of the series of art works I have made in the past six years, which constitute the practical-experimental arm of the ReForm project, is presented alongside the discursive outcomes of my research project. The two parts of the thesis form a hybrid, a theory-practice test site, a place where the materials, beliefs and practices most commonly associated with the historical Lebensreform movement are compounded¹—re-framed, re-modelled, re-formed and held up for critical examination.

The series of art works includes, performances, installations and ritual actions which involve the fusion and reworking of

¹ Compounding is the practice that leads to the creating of pharmaceutical products by combining various natural substances but has ancient roots as early humans already compounded a variety of preparations made from soil, animals, plants, moulds, fungus and bacteria as well as inorganic minerals within their environment. Ancient civilizations used pharmaceutical compounding for religion, grooming, keeping the healthy well, treating the ill and preparing the dead and meanwhile discovered poisons and the antidotes. http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/Pharmacy_compounding < 20 May 2015>

site-specific objects and materials. As Lebensreform is not just a theory but a praxis-based movement, I have chosen to consciously position myself in the role of a believer throughout this project. 'I believe' is a position, which is at once imaginative, passionate and sincere. From the outset I felt strongly that in order to produce work of the level of intensity I was seeking, I needed to adopt the radically alchemical, i.e. magical and material, Lebensreform agenda and to take its techniques and its methods seriously. Submission to the founding principles is a condition of entry into any faith-based practice/body of knowledge. Throughout history, belief as a transformative threshold experience and, as a form of willing agency, has played an important role in not just imagining but implementing the alternative systems, structures and futures which are central to any reform movement.

In this case, such a leap of faith was not hard for me to make, given my schooling in the Waldorf-Steiner system and my anthroposophical upbringing. At the same time, however, I have used this project as a way of re-examining and to some extent unravelling my own indoctrination. The ReForm project documented in this dissertation is thus partly an excavation of my own subconscious. My position of so called believer is connected to a form of primal play², not just as a re-experiencing or re-enactment, but also as a means of externalizing unconscious positions and assumptions, allowing me to be at one and the same time a Life Reform insider and a (partial) outsider. My performative installation works trace out what Johan Huizinga calls a 'magic circle'—a temporary world marked out from the ordinary world and running on a different set of rules. It is a place where, what Huizinga called the 'consecrated spot', cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground (Huizinga 1955, 10).

Reform as it is commonly understood is linked to the idea of beneficial change—an attempt to improve on an existing state of affairs. Sometimes it is seen to involve a reversion

2 I use the notion of primal play as in trauma based primal therapy, based on Freud's and Jung's ideas on personal and collective subconscious experiences which are brought to awareness and played out.

to a 'natural', pure or original state. In what follows, notions of reform as either progress or regression (and sometimes as both at once) are examined and put into question. This happens through a process of immersion—as I purposefully get lost in the materials (the archive/historical record and the literal materials I use in the artworks—mud, clay, water, graphite, textiles, medicinal plants, drywall, brick, recycled scrap). My ReForm research was primarily conducted hands on, in and through the production of art works, interventions, performances and 'pilgrimages'. These works and actions refer back to and comment on the historical research, and on the overall project. In order to abstract the idea of ReForm from its material supports, I set out to filter it through the 'materials' themselves, rather like running milk or water through screens and sieves to make cheese from curd or to extract flecks of gold from river silt.

My research questions are thus rooted in an art practice which is based in and on a kind of dreaming and emerge from an immersive process that is in large part intuitive. However, this immersion has also involved prolonged reflection on, and extensive reading in the history and philosophy of the Lebensreform movement.

The two central questions around which the thesis is organized concern what I argue is the continuing impact of Lebensreform ideas and practices on various avant-garde art and social movements from the early 20th century to the present day, and at a more personal level, the influence exerted by those ideas and practices on my own beliefs, aesthetics and artistic methodology.

Other subsidiary questions addressed include:

- How can I articulate and excavate the subterranean mystical and 'irrational' strands in Lebensreform within my art practice?
- How do the tensions between the formation of utopian communes or 'new societies'—and individual/solitary experience (personal epiphany) play out in Life Reform

history, for example in the contrast between writer and psychologist Frederik van Eeden's socialist Walden commune and its North American forebear and namesake, Henry David Thoreau's experiment in solitary 'back to nature' survivalism in rural Massachusetts? How are these contradictions played out, resolved or left unresolved in my work, in individually authored pieces and in my collaborations with the now dissolved artists' collective Civic Virtue?

- Anthroposophy and the Lebensreform were heavily implicated in the development of National Socialist ideology in Germany in the period up to and including the late 1930's. What is the nature of the liaison between these movements? Can anthroposophical and Lebensreform ideas be recuperated without reinstating the connection? What implications, if any, play a role in that history and implicit legacy for the current environmental/ecological movements and associated art trends (e.g. neo-hippy/back to nature/mud works/neo-land art)?
- How does the clash between modernity and a vision of the future rooted in an ideology of 'growth-at-all-costs' and Lebensreform ideals and practices/contemporary 'counter-cultural' art and life style production play out?
- In what ways does a contemporary art practice differ from previous movements that dealt with similar life reform topics? To what extent and in what ways does my work relate to other historical art movements that criticised values of the conventional market-driven art world, in favour of a blurring of the boundaries of art and life? For instance, art movements such as Fluxus advocated a belief in the collective rather than individual authorship, of open works to be completed by the public.